

Universities and Their Faculties as “Merchants of Light”: Contemplation on Today’s University

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Abstract

The article examines universities and their role in the global economy. It is argued that university professors, instead of being thought of as ‘merchants of light’ are compelled to become increasingly more entrepreneurial in the current climate of marketisation, profit maximisation, and global competitiveness.

Keywords: globalisation, global culture, global economy, marketisation, university

University accreditation is much more than a technical exercise.¹ The various activities surrounding university accreditation ought to cause those involved to consider the nature of the university (both in general and in the particular case in question), the role of the university in society (which necessitates contemplation of the nature of society), the mission of the university as defined by those directly involved, and the makeup of the university (the positions, the processes and the structures in place). At some point, consideration of the outcomes, the results of university activity, should be considered as well. Such an occasion as accreditation or its renewal ought to engender reflection by the individuals associated with a university as to the university’s mission and their own individual role within the educational institution and the part that each plays in fulfilling that mission.

The Banal and the Sublime: Two of the Many Sides of the University *The Sublime*

The mythology of the university includes the image of an illustrious institution of knowledge, of wisdom, and its dissemination. Great

cities had great universities (Burke, 2000). Great libraries, such as that of Alexandria, share this genealogy. Great universities have great libraries; often the library stands out as the crown jewel of a great university. But the building of great libraries is a monumental undertaking, one which requires not only vision and ambition, but great effort to see such ideas realized. Aside from the construction of the edifice to house the world's accumulated knowledge, those charged with building and filling the library in Alexandria put in place a complex, systematic process for gathering what knowledge was available at the time; in this case, they sent government/state officials to search each and every ship that docked in Alexandria in order to acquire or copy all manifests, parchments, and other documents on board for inclusion in Alexandria's repository of knowledge. As the accumulated knowledge of humankind has expanded and evolved, so too have the repositories of such knowledge, to where, today, internet companies, Google™ being principal among them, have codified and made available (free of charge, or relatively inexpensively to date), incredible amounts of not only data, but original manuscripts in digital format.² (As an aside, we are awash in data, drowning in them; so much so that there have been numerous proclamations of the end of theory – as, so it is argued, the mountains and mountains of data now being generated, captured, stored and only minimally analyzed offer such sharp insights into natural and social phenomena that theory and theorizing are so eclipsed as to become useless, unnecessary.)

Sir Francis Bacon's seventeenth century image of the research organization included those he termed 'merchants of light' – those '... who traveled in order to bring back knowledge. . . .' (Burke, 2000, p. 46). This knowledge was then taken up, worked over and codified by 'observers, experimenters, compilers, interpreters, and so on' (p. 46). Likely, Bacon based his observations on the organizational arrangements of the existing libraries or institutes of learning of his time – such research centers as the Academy of Lincei in Rome (of which Galileo was a member), the observatory at Uraniborg of Tycho Brahe, and the House of Trade in Seville, 'where data were collected and charts updated' (p. 46). We must keep in mind, though, throughout our musings on the history of knowledge and the roles of the clerisy, universities and libraries, that all of this knowledge accumulated from throughout the world was kept and kept privately for the privilege of the few – be they merchants, explorers, or advisors to the crown. Historically, libraries were private, and only the privileged and vetted were allowed to enter (Burke, 2000). Still, and with the establishment of national and municipal systems of common public educa-

tion and free public libraries, some archives and databases remain restricted. Some few professional researchers with privileged affiliation, vetted thoroughly only after making an application, may be granted access, say, to the Vatican archives/libraries or those of the US Library of Congress, to name but a few.

Travel and communication have been fundamental to the growth and accumulation of knowledge. Travel by scholars, writers, librarians and reciprocal visits by similarly positioned others augmented the stores of great libraries and repositories of knowledge and accumulated wisdom. Likewise, the exchange of letters between individuals – scholars, thinkers, teachers and others – contributed to the growth of knowledge acquisition and understanding. Today, many of these processes have been augmented, if not fully supplanted, by the internet and the World Wide Web. The role of the university today is influenced greatly by these dynamics – by the production, acquisition and consumption of knowledge; by financial, commercial and economic forces; and by the application of new technologies, both within and without the university.

The Banal

Short of being beacons of light, pursuers and the keepers of ephemeral and transcendent knowledge, universities exist in the corporeal plane. As such, they, like other human constructions, are subject to corruption and debasement of their founding ideals. A degenerate aspect of universities, but one we must acknowledge, is that of their being, to a degree, both an individual and a corporate welfare system – a fat plum or bulging purse, ripe for plunder. Universities and their revenue stream (both public and private finances) permit untold numbers of bureaucrats, administrators, educators, and workers to suckle at the public teat, like ticks that engorge themselves on the host's lifeblood. In the worst case, these parasites perform no function (work) that furthers the accomplishment of the university's mission, they are simply there for themselves. That such worst cases exist, I can attest to, from both personal and professional experience (see Waite & Allen, 2003, and Waite & Waite, 2009, for discussion of corruption in education, with special attention given to higher education). But that is not my point.

My point is that universities, besides being places of learning, are so much more than that. Just as schools are also workplaces, so too are universities. Universities are also political entities – governed by political forces and treated as political pawns, plums or rewards. Universities are situated within particular spatiotemporal contexts, and are influenced by the numerous local and global macro-level

forces and dynamics circulating at these levels (Waite, Moos, Sugrue & Liu, 2007).

Universities have financial and economic dimensions, and respond to economic forces. Indeed, as will be shown later in this paper, the business of higher education has gained supremacy today, eclipsing and nearly obliterating all other aspects of the university. This is both a result of and a contributor to the rise of the ontology of corporatism.

Status of the Profession, Status of the Institution Public Perception of Teachers

Year after year, in survey after survey, the US public rates teachers (including college-level teachers/professors) highly in terms of honesty and ethics. In 1997, for example, the Gallup organization found through a survey that Americans ranked teachers as the third most honest and ethical professionals (McAneny, 1997). Those professions that fared better were pharmacists/druggists and the clergy. In a like vein, teachers are among those professionals perceived to have the greatest prestige (Harris Interactive, 2008). In order, those professions with the perceived greatest prestige were: firefighter (57%), scientist (56%), doctor (53%), nurse (52%), and teacher (52%).² The report's discussion of the survey results noted how, in the public perception, salary was not a determiner of the profession's prestige. Also, the report discussion indicated that, over the numerous years of administration of this poll, the perception of the prestige of teaching has increased the most (from 29% in 1977 to 52% in 2008).

Another measure, that of well-being (defined as how those in certain professions 'evaluate their lives, access to resources needed to lead a healthy life, emotional health, and their likelihood of engaging in healthy behaviors' [Lopez & Agrawal, 2009, para. 31], found that teachers enjoy the greatest well-being of all the professions examined. (For the purposes of this poll, the category of teachers included public and private school and at any level – 'secondary, elementary, college, pre-school' [para. 2]).

Public Perception of Colleges/Universities.

Again, considering the role of the university in society, we might consider the public's perception. In the US at least, colleges and universities are listed among the top five most trusted institutions (The Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 2010). (Better said, the survey was designed to measure distrust or negative views of institutions, and colleges and universities, as an institution, were reported to be among the five least distrusted American institutions; in this case, 61% of survey respondents held a positive view of colleges

and universities, and 26% held a negative view.) Those institutions faring better than colleges and universities were (from the most positive to the least): technology companies (68% positive, 18% negative), small businesses (71% positive, 19% negative), and churches and religious organizations (63% positive, 22% negative).³

Those institutions in which the American public had the least trust were: banks and financial institutions (22% positive, 69% negative), the US Congress (24% positive, 65% negative), the US federal government (25% positive, 65% negative), large corporations (25% positive, 64% negative), the national news media (31% positive, 57% negative), federal agencies and departments (31% positive, 54% negative), the entertainment industry (33% positive, 51% negative), labor unions (32% positive, 49% negative), and the Obama administration (45% positive, 45% negative) (The Pew Center, 2010).⁴

The American people's opinion of US colleges and universities were gauged in another manner when the Harris polling organization investigated what people liked and didn't like about the US (The Harris Poll, 2010). The poll revealed that a substantial majority of those polled favored, in this order, science and technology (75% of respondents rated this category excellent or pretty good), the Constitution (70% positive rating), the quality of life (66%), and colleges and universities (65%).

Though the measures cited above are particular to the US context, likely similar phenomena and their measure reflect upon institutions of higher education worldwide. Another measure of the health and/or perception of a nation's colleges and universities is the demand for them as measured by international (foreign) student enrollment.⁵ As of 2008 (OECD, 2008), the countries with the greatest number of non-citizen university students (i.e., international or 'foreign' students) were, in rank order: the US (624,474), the UK (462,609), Germany (245,522), France (243,436), and Australia (230,635). Estimates of revenue generation from international student enrollment (though problematic⁶) range from '\$15.5 billion for the US, \$15 billion for Australia, \$14.1 billion for the UK, \$6 billion for Canada to \$1.5 billion or more for New Zealand' (Ruby, 2009, para. 13). There are reports that several countries, including Japan and China, are actively seeking to increase the number of international students choosing to study in those countries (Redden, 2010).

Market-Driven Indicators of Quality

Other market-driven indicators, if not of the quality of the institution of higher education per se, at least of the *perception* of the quality

of that institution, are those of demand (i.e., number of applicants), price (tuition), and ranking.

Another way of looking at demand – the total number of applicants to a university, would be to look at the number of applicants per opening. This number begins to get at selectivity, something universities tout, as it contributes to their prestige. Another measure of selectivity is that of the quality (or perceived quality) of those who made application and of those who are admitted (i.e., those who in the end make up the entering freshman class). This approximation of quality can be had by calculating the applicants' or admitted students' grade point averages or scores on any of a number of admissions tests (such as the SAT, GRE, TOEFL, etc.).

Any number of organizations and their various publications publish university rankings. Generally, these refer to academic or perceived academic standing; though ranking in the various sports and sports leagues to which universities belong is not unimportant. *U. S. News and World Report* (no longer publishing in hard copy) and *The Princeton Review* annually publish rankings of the US universities, and in several categories. Times Higher Education, published by Thomson Reuters, does the same for universities worldwide⁷, as do numerous other companies and organizations. In fact, a group was recently assembled to take on the task of regulating or auditing the numerous international university rankings and their production (Labi, 2010); that group, the International Ranking Expert Group (IREG), formed in 2004, has instituted an Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence.

These occurrences speak to the politically (and methodologically) contested nature of international university rankings, and, of course, the huge investment and payoff for those favorably ranked.^{viii} The production of and use of rankings and even standards (norm referenced or criterion referenced) is always already problematic. Some of the difficulties attendant the production of and use of rankings we might reasonably predict from the experiences we have had with primary and secondary (public) school high-stakes accountability systems (see McNeil, 2000; Waite, Boone & McGhee, 2001) and with hierarchies generally (Waite, 2010). Some other issues or problems with evaluation and assessment, broadly, and the ranking of universities have to do with knowledge production and control, professional/personal autonomy, the inherently dynamic and unstable (inequitable) socio-cultural conditions contributing to and resulting from such ranking, and the psychic costs incurred by the individuals involved and by the society (societies) at large.

Some Problems with Markets as a Control Mechanism for Universities

Universities cannot be separated out from economics and markets, these are dimensions of the contexts within which universities operate. Similarly, as a social institution, there are certain financial or economic aspects to the operation of the university. Whether and to what degree financial considerations control any one university is dependent upon the society in which that university is located and the understandings or arrangements between the university and the state and the state and the people (i.e., the social contract), among other things. This begs other questions, among which are: How are universities in a particular country/society funded? Is there a distinction, say in funding, between public and private universities; or between public (secular) and religious universities? Are universities in a particular locale funded primarily by public (state) money through taxes or are they funded primarily through tuition and fees? What proportions of each – tuition and state money – go to universities? Are universities in a particular country expected to generate revenue? If so, how? What of the various quasi-formal arms of any university – for example centers and institutes; are these, too, funded with public monies or private? Are they expected to generate revenue for the university? What of profits generated by any particular unit of the university, whether formally aligned or loosely affiliated? What of the profit or revenue (income) generated/earned by any one individual in the university's employ? Do all universities provide each faculty member, for instance, with the same resources and enjoy the same (or equal) in return from each faculty member? How is that return judged?

Of these questions posed here (and there are many others which could be, but haven't yet been so posed), several speak directly to issues of resourcing, support, ranking, and accreditation. For if universities are differentially resourced, and we might assume that the same goes for individual faculty, what does this mean for accreditation? If individuals (and we might assume universities as well) 'produce' differently, how does this influence our consideration of accreditation? Or does it?

Burke (2000) noted how, by the later Middle Ages, about 50 universities had formed – from those in Paris, Bologna, Oxford, Salamanca, to Naples, Prague, Pavia, Cracow, Leuven, Glasgow and more. Of these, he wrote: 'These universities were corporations. They had privileges, including independence and the monopoly of higher education in their region, and they recognized one another's degrees' (p. 33). Burke further commented as to how:

it was assumed rather than argued that universities ought to concentrate on transmitting knowledge as opposed to discovering it [or producing it]. In similar fashion, it was assumed that the opinions and interpretations of the great scholars and philosophers of the past could not be equaled or refuted by posterity, so the task of the teacher was to expound the views of authorities. (p. 33)

But more than simply their being 'merchants of light,' as Bacon referred to them (/us academics, the clerisy) (as cited in Burke, 2000, p. 46), with the predictable increase in the bureaucratization of universities there have come many for whom university life/employment is simply a job, and a good, well-paying job at that.

More than thirty university presidents in the US earned upwards of \$1,000,000 total compensation (Lewin, 2010c) in 2008 (the last year for which figures were available), and some earned much more (one earned over 4 million dollars, another more than 2 million – though each of these individuals died during the year). The *New York Times* reported that the greatest compensation package for a sitting university president in 2008 was that of R. Gerald Turner, president of Southern Methodist University, with a total package of \$2,774,000 (Lewin, 2010c). What's more, it is not unique for universities to compensate *former* administrators at or near their former salary (Fain & Carew, 2009).

Still, this compensation cannot compare to that of the highest paid employee on many, if not most, US university campuses, the football coach. Football coaches in the top ranks of US college football can easily earn four or five million dollars annually, plus bonuses (Halliburton, 2009). Athletic directors at the top universities in the US can easily earn more than one million dollars, plus bonuses (Drape & Thomas, 2010). Professors, too, can be well compensated.

According to a report by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, 2010), the median salary for a full professor at the Category I (doctoral) university in the US was \$125,300 (comparatively, the median public university president's salary was \$377,500). There are relatively few hindrances to (some) faculty supplementing their income, sometimes quite handsomely so and through questionable practices. For example, in the field of medicine, professors and directors at university hospitals can, and often do, sit on the boards of large medical or pharmaceutical firms, sometimes garnering up to \$200,000 per year (Wilson, 2010a), over and above their institutional salary. Medical faculty and researchers often are paid generous speaking fees (\$10,000 per day and more) to speak (i.e., promote) a

company's drugs. This academic research conflict of interest usually goes unreported (Harris, 2009).

The medical academic field is awash in questionable ethics. In addition to the pay issues just mentioned, pharmaceutical companies are known to hire ghost writers to write articles supportive of their products, backed by copious amounts of data, for publication in academic journals (Singer, 2009). These are typically review articles that never mention the role of the pharmaceutical company (for example, Wyeth) 'in initiating and paying for the work' (p. B2). Some such medical professors have been paid one million dollars a year as 'consultants' for medical device, primarily orthopedic, companies (Wilson, 2010b). These 'consultants' later published journal articles featuring the company's device(s) without disclosing any conflict of interest. According to one report, five such companies paid \$250 million to consultants in 2007; 'of that total, \$114 million went to 41 doctors, the study said, of whom 32 wrote or were co-authors on orthopedic journal articles the next year' (para. 14). Though the articles are ghost written, with the pharmaceutical or orthopedic company paying for the ghost writer's services, the company contracts a highly-reputed academic/scholar/researcher in the field to be named as author and who gets credit for the publication. According to reports, ghost writing of academic articles is common practice in all academic disciplines in places such as China.

Such lives as these led Greenberg (as cited in Wade, 2010) to describe academic life as comprised of:

annual pay increases, lax to near-non-existent conflict-of-interest and conflict-of-commitment regulations, and ample pools of powerless grad students, postdocs and adjuncts to minimize professional workloads. As a safety net, the faculty favored disciplinary procedures that virtually assured acquittal of members of abusing subordinates, seducing students, committing plagiarism, fabricating data, or violating the one-day-a-week limit on money-making outside dealings. (p. D3)

Entrepreneurialism in Higher Education Gone Awry

In some parts of the world, India, for example, the number of universities is mushrooming, and that fast growth brings quality concerns. Developing countries are not the only ones dogged by questions of higher education quality: So-called diploma mills may sprout up anywhere. In the US, for example, a couple plead guilty to mail and wire fraud after being investigated for the circumstances surrounding their establishment of more than 120 fictitious universities (Schemo, 2008), fictitious universities which sold diplomas and degrees for a price. Exploiting the internet, *The New York Times* noted how this

particular couple was able to grow its companies' revenues from \$5000 in 1999 to more than \$1.65 million in 2005, 'churning out more than 10,000 diplomas for customers in 131 countries' (p. 13). One of the investigators in this case estimated that all such companies sold '100,000 to 200,000 phony degrees a year' (p. 13). The report noted how the Government Accountability Office, 'which surveyed only 2 percent of federal employees, found 463 who had bought degrees from three diploma mills . . . [and] warned that the true number was probably much higher' (p. 13). Even the then deputy undersecretary for personnel and readiness, 'charged with overseeing two million Pentagon employees, claimed a master's degree from Columbus University, which left Louisiana after officials there demanded proper accreditation' (p. 13). At least fourteen New York City firefighters are thought to have used the fake credentials to win promotions and raises. The guilty couple went further and offered phony degrees from established universities, according to court records: 'the couple offered false transcripts and letters of recommendation, and special telephone lines to verify the credentials to employers' (p. 13). This case and similar ones highlight the dark side of the entrepreneurial spirit (capitalism) as it affects higher education, but other, less clearly illegal, but still highly suspect, instances abound, especially currently in the US; to wit: the case of for-profit universities.

Other Questionable Practices in Higher Education

The case of for-profit universities

Recently there has been an explosion in the number of so-called for-profit universities in the US, many originally or primarily begun online. Several of these are publicly traded as for-profit education companies, principal among these are the Apollo group, parent company for the University of Phoenix, and Kaplan Inc., owned by the Washington Post Company (Lewin, 2010e). Currently these companies and their practices are under scrutiny by the US Congress and at least one is being investigated by the federal Securities and Exchange Commission for insider trading in its selling off of stock during an investigation into its practices (Morgenson, 2010).

The first indications of trouble with the for-profit universities surfaced when data became available at the federal level that these schools had significantly large numbers of students/graduates who defaulted on their student loans (Lewin, 2010b) and, later, that they had dismally low graduation rates (Lewin, 2010d). For the University of Phoenix, with more than 450,000 students, the graduation rate for students after six years of study was only five percent. Many of these students borrow heavily to finance their education, 'default on their loans, or struggle to make payments but find that their lives are

taken over by debt' (p. A18). The reason the federal government became interested was that most of the student loans were federally subsidized. Students borrow money, then pay the university. In the case of the University of Phoenix, federal monies made up almost 90% of their revenue (and this for a privately-held for-profit university). When the students default, the federal government is out that money, in essence, the taxpayers pick up the bill.

Another concern is the fraudulent recruiting practices engaged in by for-profit recruiters. In an undercover investigation conducted by the Government Accountability Office, investigators posing as prospective students were oversold on the amount of income they stood to earn in the profession they inquired about, were given extremely low tuition figures for their financial liability (estimated tuition costs over the course of their studies), and were encouraged to lie on their financial aid applications (Lewin, 2010a). Kaplan is the defendant in several whistle-blower law suits, brought by former employees who charge the company with unlawful and retaliatory termination of their employment for their having raised critical ethical and legal concerns (Lewin, 2010e). The education unit of the Washington Post Company, the owner of Kaplan, has become the highest grossing division of that company, grossing just under \$800 million in 2010 alone. The University of Phoenix took in close to \$1 billion last year.

Implications

The point I have been trying to make, which must be obvious by now, is that higher education is a big business. I have not touched much upon the human costs – in personal finances, time, energy and angst spent; however, these are difficult to measure on a global scale. The public, at least in the US, still has faith in colleges and universities and in their teachers, but the light has dimmed. No longer can university professors be thought of as merchants of light within the current corporatist regimes of education. If anything, they have transmuted into being more merchant than luminary. Doubtless there are many who still cling to the ideal that is/was the lifeblood of the university – learning. Those who have succumbed to the lure of the dollar, the seduction of a plump pay packet, battle against many forces that push the other way. As faculty, we daily hear calls to become more entrepreneurial. The reward structures of most universities, indeed those of the global system of higher education, privilege those who go after and bring in revenue for the institution, and sometimes these efforts push the limits of legality, or cross the line entirely.

Is accreditation important? Is it necessary? Certainly. But I would

suggest that there are many more pressing concerns we must face as we seek to better our institutions of higher education. Accreditation is a minimal, perhaps fundamental step. But we must be sure to cast our minds and our imagination to grander things as we envision our collective future.

Notes

¹ This paper was previously published in *La Acreditación en las Instituciones de Educación Superior*, J. Gairín Sallán & M. Martín Bris (eds.), Santiago, Chile: Comisión Nacional de Acreditación CAN-Chile & Fundación Creando Futuro, 2011.

² The Google™ library digitization project currently involves that company and Harvard University, the New York Public Library, the University of Michigan, Oxford University, and Stanford University as initial participating partners (Wikipedia, 2010). Other participating universities and libraries include: the Bavarian State Library, Columbia University, the Committee on Institutional Collaboration (which includes 12 participating research universities), Complutense University of Madrid, the National Library of Catalonia, among others. The project's aim is to scan, digitize and make available and searchable many, if not most, of the world's greatest books.

³ That colleges and universities weren't more positively perceived by the American public may have been influenced by a recent spate of news stories (and the accompanying concern of the US Congress) over the questionable practices of for-profit colleges and universities and their parent companies. Such questionable practices include the extremely high number students defaulting on their (generally government issued and backed) student loans (some for-profit universities, such as the University of Phoenix, take in nearly 90% of their revenue from the federal government, by way of government-backed loans to students). This issue is made worse when these students then do not repay these monies; in effect, the money becomes a direct government subsidy of the university in question.

Also, about the time of the survey reported by the Pew Center (2010), numerous for-profit universities and colleges, and their parent companies (Kaplan and the Washington Post, for example) were exposed in the national media as engaging in unethical, even fraudulent recruiting practices in order to increase enrollment, tuition, income and profit (Lewin, 2010a). These practices were exposed as consisting of, but not being limited to, deceptive statements by recruiters, college advisors and the like as to the time to degree (graduation) or program completion by the prospective applicant, seriously under-estimating the overall debt load the prospective student was likely to have upon completion of his/her degree or certificate, and disingenuously and consciously over-estimating the salary the prospective student was likely to earn upon completion.

⁴ So, in essence, this survey of US citizens' feelings of trust in their institutions placed colleges and universities between churches and religious organizations and the Obama administration. Note, however, that the trust/distrust felt toward colleges and universities was numerically closer to the churches and religious organizations than it was that for the Obama administration. Also, the main survey was conducted in March 2010, before the national mid-term elections, wherein the opposition party did so well as to shift the power

balance in the US House of Representatives and in a number of state governors' races; these races and the attendant negative campaigning associated with them likely seriously altered Obama's positive numbers.

⁵ Mention of international student enrollment is done so cautiously, as such metrics have the tendency to introduce a measure of competition (or the appearance of competition) between and among nations—something I do not intend. However, with that said, nations and their education systems and individual universities *do* compete for the international student market. Even private US secondary schools have begun actively recruiting for students abroad.

⁶ Ruby (2009) reported how the method for calculating revenue was contested by an Australian professor: 'The estimates appear in the popular media periodically and were largely unchallenged until recently.' Early last month, Dr Bob Birrell, an Australian demographer with a long-time interest in immigration and international students, claimed in *University World News* that the estimates for Australia numbers were wrong. The possible error was an inflation of as much as 50%, Birrell said.

The sources of error were allegedly buried in the statistical methods used, outdated expenditure data and incorrect assumptions about the spending power of the international student population" (para. 14-16).

See <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/>

⁷ There is no indication from news reports of the IREG that anyone associated with that organization is aware of the irony surrounding its work: In essence, they are intent on ranking the rankings!

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